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# THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

War Food Administration  
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# WAR FOOD ADMINISTRATION

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THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM<sup>1</sup>

## PRESENT PROGRAM

Congress--after careful consideration by both Houses--has again authorized the use of \$50,000,000 for community school lunch programs during the fiscal year 1945. It was recognized that, with the United States at war, the problem of providing a nourishing noonday meal to millions of school youngsters was complicated by extraordinary conditions--millions of mothers were working at war jobs and the stresses and strains of all-out war were endangering the health of America's youth. Also Congress was aware of the fact that the school lunch program continues to be an admirable outlet for agricultural commodities in seasonal abundance--thus tying-in with the price-support program. The school lunch program, from the beginning, has had the dual purpose of relieving want and providing support for farm prices.

Under the program for the 1945 fiscal year, as in 1944, the Office of Distribution of the War Food Administration is using the authorized \$50,000,000 to supplement locally available funds for carrying on community school lunch programs. Some of the money is used to reimburse sponsors who have entered into an agreement with the WFA to buy certain foods for use in meals served to children at school, and some of it is used for the purchase and distribution to schools of foods temporarily in large supply, such as shell eggs, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, beets, and other perishable commodities.

<sup>1</sup>Prepared by Joseph H. Boyle, formerly of the Marketing Reports Division, with the assistance of other members of that staff and of the staff of the Civilian Food Requirements Branch. Mr. Boyle is now with the Soil Conservation Service.

The present school lunch program grew out of activity that has been carried on within the general authority of and with funds provided under Section 32 of Public Law No. 320, approved August 24, 1935.<sup>2</sup> This measure originated with the Committee on Agriculture in the House of Representatives. The purpose of this legislation was to make available to the farmers of the Nation a share of the yearly customs receipts to be used in the development of permanently expanded markets for agricultural commodities. Producers of agricultural surpluses were a group afforded no protection by tariffs.

Since enactment of this legislation, the Department of Agriculture has used these funds for the removal of farm surpluses. Outlets had to be developed which would result in new and permanent markets for the commodities. The principal ones were the Food Stamp Plan, direct distribution to families, and the School Lunch Program. (For review of activities up to the present program, see *The School Lunch Program in the United States Since 1900*, page 13.)

During the hearings on the agricultural appropriation bill for 1944, doubt was expressed as to the legality of the use of Section 32 authority and funds for the administration of the school lunch program, inasmuch as agricultural surpluses had practically disappeared. The following specific language was therefore included in the appropriation act: ". . . during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1944, funds

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<sup>2</sup>Section 32, Public Law No. 320, 74th Congress (49 Stat. 750).



appropriated by or for the purpose of Section 32 . . . shall be available to the Secretary of Agriculture for the maintenance and operation of a school milk and lunch program under clause (2) of said Section 32 in a sum not exceeding \$50,000,000: *Provided*, That such funds shall be available for such purposes during the fiscal year 1944 without regard to the requirements therein relating to the encouragement of domestic consumption, but no part of such funds shall be available to defray the expenses of any activity heretofore carried on by the Works Projects Administration."

In order to provide for the continuation of the program during the fiscal year 1945, specific language was included in the Department of Agriculture Appropriation Act, 1945, (Public Law 367--78th Cong.) approved June 28, 1944, as follows:

"Not exceeding \$50,000,000 of the funds appropriated . . . may also be used during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1945, to provide for consumption by children in nonprofit schools of high-school grade or under and for child-care centers through (a) the purchase, processing, and exchange, and the distribution of agricultural commodities and products thereof; or (b) the making of payments to such schools and centers or agencies having control thereof in connection with the purchase and distribution of agricultural commodities in fresh or processed form and, when desirable, for the processing and exchange of such commodities and their products; or (c) by such other means as the Secretary may determine: *Provided*, . . . That benefits under this section

to schools or child-care centers shall in no case exceed the cost of the agricultural commodities or products thereof delivered to the school or child-care center as established by certificates executed by the authorized representative of the sponsoring agency: . . . The amount of funds used in any State during any fiscal year under this paragraph shall not exceed the total amount otherwise furnished for the same purpose by or on behalf of the State and local school authorities and other sponsoring agencies in such State including the value of donated services and supplies, as certified by the respective schools, care centers or agencies having control thereof."

Since March 1943, direct distribution of commodities to schools through State and local welfare agencies has been sharply curtailed owing to the difficulty of maintaining warehousing and distribution facilities under wartime conditions.

Under the new plan of operation, indemnity payments are now made to schools, or approved sponsoring organizations, for the local purchase of agricultural commodities needed in the school lunch program. Specified foods are purchased directly from local farmers and food dealers. Reimbursement is provided up to a maximum amount based on the type and number of lunches served. On the average this reimbursement amounts to about 50 percent of the total cost of the lunch program. Local and State agencies and organizations provide additional food as well as equipment, facilities, kitchen help, and program supervision.



The aim of the War Food Administration in the present school lunch program is to make it a community program in which the WFA assists local sponsors by furnishing a part of the food for the lunches--to encourage the community to do the job itself, as far as possible.

The program relies on local interest and initiative, local sponsorship and administration. State and local governmental units are now lending greater financial support and assuming more responsibility for developing school lunch programs than ever before.

During March 1944 the program was operated in about 30,000 schools, with more than 4 million children participating.

The WFA has bought shell eggs and potatoes, under price-support programs, as well as a number of fresh vegetables and peaches. The 1944 cost of commodities purchased under price-support programs and distributed to school lunch programs is estimated at \$5,000,000.

Under the school lunch authority, the WFA has bought fresh vegetables and peaches in plentiful supply this summer and donated them to community canning centers to be processed for school lunch programs. Without this canning program, it is difficult to see what would be done with temporary abundances which are bound to occur. Besides American youngsters would be denied health-giving food which might otherwise be wasted.

The importance of the school lunch program in developing permanently expanded markets for

agricultural commodities cannot be emphasized too strongly. Millions of children are learning to eat well and to eat new foods. In many schools, the drinking of milk has increased manyfold. The school lunch program has introduced thousands of youngsters to oranges, grapefruit, fresh vegetables, dairy products, and a number of other foods not commonly found in low-income diets. It is one of the Department of Agriculture's well-tested methods for meeting recurring agricultural and food problems.

The role of the school lunch program in providing nutritious noonday meals and helping to remove temporary agricultural abundances is well illustrated by the table on page 7.

Malnutrition is, of course, closely associated with poverty. But poverty is by no means an exclusive cause of it. One Department of Agriculture survey showed that some families spending as little as 10 cents per person per meal for food achieved good diets. Conversely, some families spending enough to have good diets had poor ones. In other words, wise food management can provide a satisfactory diet even at low income, and large expenditures for food may not make up for not knowing the principles of good nutrition or being indifferent to the importance of applying those principles.

School attendance, strangely enough, may keep some children from having proper nutrition. Many children live too far from school to return home for the noon meal. They must either bring lunch from home or buy it at school. Unless a well-supervised lunch service is

DIRECT DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD IN THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM,  
MARCH OF EACH YEAR, 1937-43<sup>1</sup>

MONTH OF MARCH (Usual peak month of participation)	CHILDREN	SCHOOLS	FOOD DISTRIBUTED	ESTIMATED RETAIL VALUE OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED
<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Pounds</i>	<i>Dollars</i>
1937	342,031	3,839	1,192,256	85,062
1938	567,000	11,021	3,944,770	201,318
1939	892,259	14,075	5,244,211	408,804
1940	2,483,578	35,658	14,704,698	1,177,233
1941	4,715,311	66,783	56,000,589	4,368,371
1942	6,164,799	93,076	73,000,000	6,100,000
1943 <sup>2</sup>	4,366,829	58,368	22,393,041	2,739,123

<sup>1</sup>In March 1944, the cash indemnity plan was in operation. During that month 3,872,974 children in 31,787 schools were served lunches made up in part of \$4,846,885 worth of food, for which the WFA reimbursed the sponsors.

<sup>2</sup>March of 1943 was not the usual peak month of participation because of the gradual disappearance of national abundances coupled with mounting transportation and warehousing difficulties.

February of 1943 was the peak month of participation and the figures follow:

Children . . . . .	number . . . . .	5,301,544
Schools . . . . .	number . . . . .	73,100
Food . . . . .	pounds . . . . .	44,500,000
Estimated retail value of the food . . . . .		\$4,900,000

operated by the school, the children are all too likely to have a "hot dog," a soft drink, and a candy bar.

The remedy for ignorance and indifference is education. Untold effort is being made nowadays toward teaching the general public the practical principles of nutrition and certainly the campaign has had some effect. But it is inevitably a long-range program. The very fact of their poverty and ignorance makes any of the groups most needing such education the hardest to reach effectively. Furthermore, no amount of teaching would be likely to make the poorest one-fourth of the Nation's families well-fed if they do not have the money to buy food. Meanwhile, malnourished children are daily growing into unhealthy adults.

Provision of well-planned free or low-priced lunches at school for undernourished children offers the most direct and immediate means of attack on this problem. It makes use of an existing institutional framework, the school system, which reaches all children of school age. It does not, of course, correct the most important underlying cause, poverty, except in the sense that it supplements the inadequate diet the children receive as members of a poor family. But it is one way of doing something about the problem immediately while waiting for longer range programs to take effect.

## EARLY HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

School feeding, an outgrowth of the industrial revolution and the social doctrines

of the French Revolution, assumed important proportions in the last 150 years in the school systems of Europe and America.<sup>3</sup>

There have been similarities in the rise of school feeding in all western countries. The movement started as a charitable endeavor, carried on by private or semiofficial agencies. In the course of time it became a concern of municipal and, later, of State and national governments.

In England, during the Boer War, the provision of school lunches became a national issue soon after the startling statement made in 1902 by a major general in the British Army that only two out of every five men who wished to become soldiers were physically fit.

To answer an aroused public, two special committees of technical experts were appointed by Parliament in successive years to study the general, social, and economic causes for the alleged deterioration of certain classes, and to discover means of diminishing it.

These committees came to similar conclusions: That there was no hereditary taint causing progressive degeneration but that environmental factors counterbalanced strength at birth; that the most prominent of these destructive environmental factors was malnutrition, especially among school children; and that the most practical scheme to improve this condition was a program of school feeding.

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<sup>3</sup>Bureau of Agricultural Economics "The School Lunch Program and Agricultural Surplus Disposal." 1941.



They recommended that the school lunches be supported wherever possible by private funds, public funds to be used only when the costs could not otherwise be met. However, one minority member of the committee maintained that "We have got to the point where we must face the question whether the logical culmination of free education is not free meals in some form, it being cruelty to force a child to go and learn what it has not the strength to learn."<sup>4</sup>

The school lunch program in England officially started with the passage by Parliament in 1906 of the "Provision of Meals Act." This law transferred school feeding from charities to the local educational officials by authorizing them to install, as part of their regular school equipment, restaurants for serving warm meals to children--free to those unable to pay and at cost to others. The legislation was not mandatory in nature. The meals were controlled by local committees on which the school board had to be represented. The cost of the food was met, as far as possible, by parents and voluntary contributions, and if these sources failed, by a local tax.

The school lunch program in England was broadened and improved by amendatory and additional legislation. In 1907, medical inspection was made compulsory in all schools. In many schools, medical officers chose the children to be fed and approved the composition of the meal. In 1914 schools were authorized

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<sup>4</sup>Bryant, L. S. "School Feeding; Its History and Practice at Home and Abroad." 1913.



to serve meals throughout the vacation periods, after careful studies had showed that benefits of previous school feeding were often lost during school vacations when the service was discontinued.

In 1934, under the National Milk Marketing Scheme, special appropriations were given to the Milk Marketing Board to provide milk to school children free, or at a special price (which in terms of United States standards was 1 cent for 0.4 pint of milk).

The Unemployment Insurance Act of 1938 conferred on the local authorities for higher education the power to provide meals for youths attending certain vocational classes under the same conditions as for elementary school children.

Under the British system most of the meals are served free: About 95 percent of the ordinary meals, 65 percent of the milk meals, and 72 percent of the others. In the school year 1938-39, nearly 700,000 children received free meals. In terms of total school enrollment, this meant that almost 12 percent of all the children in England and Wales received free milk; about 1 percent, free solid meals; and nearly 3 percent received both free meals and milk.

Experience with school lunches in England is typical of the experience on the Continent. Lunch service has been supported by national legislation in Holland, France, Switzerland, Scotland, Denmark, Italy, Finland, Austria, and Belgium, and has been nation-wide in scope in

Russia and Spain. In Sweden, Norway, and Germany the provision of school lunches has been carried on through extensive municipal legislation.

Holland was the first country to have national legislation, specifically for school feeding, through a law passed in 1900 authorizing municipalities to provide food and clothing for all school children in both public and private schools "who were unable, because of the lack of food and clothing to go regularly to school or to those who probably would not continue to attend school regularly unless food and clothes were provided."

Latin American experience with the school lunch program is also significant. Although school feeding was not undertaken on a national scale in any of the countries of South or Central America until late in the 1920's, rapid development of lunch programs in the last few years indicates that public authorities have begun to take action on a broad scale to meet the serious problem of child malnutrition in those countries.

Free breakfast, lunch, and milk projects, supported either wholly or in part by governmental funds, are now maintained in Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Paraguay, Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, Cuba, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Argentina.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Adapted from unpublished material collected by Mrs. J. Raushenbush of the former Surplus Marketing Administration, which is now a part of the Office of Distribution.

## THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM IN THE U.S. SINCE 1900

The U. S. Government has been interested in the school lunch program for many years, but compared with some European countries, we have been relatively slow in coping with the problem of malnutrition in children. It was not until after the turn of the century that public interest was really aroused in regard to the subject, although there previously had been sporadic projects by private societies.

Public awakening in the United States to the significance of the problem may be attributed, to a great extent, to the publication of two books: "Poverty," by Robert Hunter in 1904, and "Underfed School Children, the Problem and the Remedy" by John Spargo in 1906. These authors estimated that there were several million undernourished children in the United States, pointed out how Europe had attacked the problem of malnutrition by school feeding, and advocated a similar program in the United States.

Many cities started to operate "penny-lunch" programs in elementary schools, often taking over the task formerly carried on by voluntary societies. Small portions of food, a bowl of soup, bread and butter, and cocoa, for example, were sold for 1 to 3 cents during the midmorning or midafternoon recess.

A survey on school feeding, made in 1918 by the Bureau of Municipal Research (New York) in 86 cities of more than 50,000 population, revealed that there was some provision for lunches in high schools in 76 percent of the

cities but that service was maintained in elementary schools in only 25 percent of these cities. Elementary school children evidently were presumed not to need lunches at school as they could ordinarily go home for the noon meal, whereas the shortness of the lunch period in high schools made the lunch necessary. However, it should be pointed out that the high school service was considered only a convenient accessory to the school system and not a means of improving nutrition. Of the 72 cities reporting this service, only 5 indicated that the lunch had been established to combat malnutrition.

Concern over school lunches in rural schools followed the city school-feeding program. For many years the State and Federal extension workers in home economics had advocated and cooperated in setting up plans for school lunches. A common arrangement was for the children to contribute food for a hot dish prepared by the teacher in place of, or supplementary to, the cold lunches brought from home.

Ingenuity was often displayed in various localities in obtaining equipment and maintaining lunches, usually under some cooperative arrangement with parents, teachers, and local organizations, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, agricultural clubs, and church societies.

The school lunch movement expanded along these lines during the decade 1920-30. In 1931 the Director of Research of the Nation's schools estimated that 64,500 cafeterias, in addition to 11,500 schools, were serving single hot dishes and that additional cafeterias were opening at the rate of about 7,500 annually.



## U. S. GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION

Agencies of the Federal Government had been interested in school lunch work for many years prior to 1930. The Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics and the Extension Service of the Department of Agriculture, together with the State land-grant colleges, worked primarily in rural areas. Specialists in nutrition and home economics helped to develop techniques for providing lunches in rural schools, and State and county field workers carried on educational campaigns for the introduction of hot lunches in the local communities.

It was not until the great depression of the 1930's, with its paradox of hunger and large crop "surpluses," that the school lunch movement really gathered momentum. Up until that time, most school cafeterias had been operated as a service to high school students and as a fund-raising enterprise for schools and concessionaires.

During the depression, however, it became apparent that danger of malnutrition among school children was a matter of national concern. Local funds were inadequate where the need was greatest, and active Federal aid was deemed necessary.

Coupled with this need was another problem of at least equal importance. Farmers had struggled with the problem of agricultural "surpluses" for a long time. The need for disposing of these so-called surpluses and thus providing support for farm prices was

another or dual need, tying-in very closely with the school lunch program.

The Department of Agriculture instituted its direct purchase and distribution programs to help farmers solve the problems of disposing of "surplus" crops. One of the methods for disposing of these "surplus" crops--especially commendable from the humanitarian standpoint--was to distribute them through State welfare agencies in the school lunch program.

The Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation became the principal agency for disposing of surplus agricultural commodities with the passage of Public Law No. 165, 75th Congress, approved on June 28, 1937.

This corporation, formerly called the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, had been organized under powers granted to the President by the National Industrial Recovery Act, approved June 18, 1933.<sup>6</sup>

The corporation charter was granted by the State of Delaware on October 4, 1933, and amended on November 18, 1935, changing the name to the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation. It was continued "as an agency of the United States under the Secretary of Agriculture" by acts of Congress.<sup>7</sup>

The school lunch program was a part of the larger program for removing abundant agri-

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<sup>6</sup>48 Stat. 195.

<sup>7</sup>50 Stat. 323; sec. 204 of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938; 52 Stat. 38; 15 USC 713c.



cultural commodities. This program was also closely interrelated with the marketing agreements program of the Department of Agriculture. These programs sought the common goal of more efficient marketing and frequently they were developed together.

The school lunch program was a joint project, carried on in cooperation with the WPA, NYA, and local educational, civic, and welfare organizations.

Legislation, under which school lunch program activities were included, was provided by Section 32 of Public Law No. 320, 74th Congress, approved August 24, 1935, and subsequent amendments. This legislation made available to the Secretary of Agriculture an amount of money equal to 30 percent of annual customs receipts, which might be expended for any of the authorized purposes.

The school lunch program was one of three broad programs designed to encourage direct increases in the consumption of agricultural commodities. The other two programs were: (1) Purchasing surplus farm products for direct distribution to needy families through State welfare agencies; and (2) the Food Stamp Plan.

This and related legislation provided agriculture with additional machinery to deal more effectively with certain phases of the farm surplus problem on a more or less permanent basis, but the legislation was not without precedent.

Congress had previously recognized the desirability of making use of supplies of farm products which had accumulated, with ruinous effect on farmers, because of decreased domestic buying power and declining foreign markets. In 1932 and 1933, for example, Congress directed that portions of the large supplies of Government-held wheat and cotton be made available to the Red Cross for distribution to the needy and distressed. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 included broad authority for surplus removal and market expansion operations. Legislation in 1934 gave specific authorization for programs of this type for the dairy and beef cattle industries, and provided for the distribution of livestock products for relief purposes.

Through the enactment of Section 32, Public Law No. 320, Congress indicated a continuing policy directed at finding ways of encouraging consumption and utilizing farm products so as to avoid ruinous agricultural conditions. Subsequent amendments to this section have further defined the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture and stipulated that funds could be transferred by the Secretary from Section 32 to the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation to be used for the purchase of commodities to be donated for relief purposes. A further amendment, enacted in the fiscal year 1938, authorized the encouragement of increased domestic consumption among low-income groups and provided for a somewhat broader means of increasing the use of agricultural commodities through indemnity or other payments. At the same time, Congress

appropriated \$113,000,000 for use, in addition to Section 32 funds, for the fiscal year 1940.<sup>8</sup>

Under the President's Reorganization Plan No. III, the FSCC was consolidated with the Division of Marketing and Marketing Agreements of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration into the Surplus Marketing Administration, effective June 30, 1940, and the SMA was merged into the Agricultural Marketing Administration by Executive Order 9069 of February 23, 1942. The Agricultural Marketing Administration was made a part of the Food Distribution Administration on December 5, 1942, and the Food Distribution Administration became the Office of Distribution of the War Food Administration on January 21, 1944.

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<sup>8</sup>Annual Report, U. S. D. A., 1939, op. cit. p. 50.

